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ABSTRACT

Attachment theory offers a useful framework for the study of human behavior in relationships. It has been suggested that applying attachment theory to the study of supervision may increase understanding of both the trainee's and supervisor's experience of supervision. Reviews of empirical work done in the field of supervision point consistently to the need for more information on the supervisory relationship and trainee individual characteristics. This study examines the effect of trainee attachment on supervisory variables; specifically, the main goal of this exploratory study is to investigate the influence of trainee attachment on trainee satisfaction with supervision, perceptions of the supervisory relationship, and perceptions of supervisory style. Graduate students providing individual counseling or psychotherapy and receiving individual supervision were surveyed. Descriptive statistics are provided for the sample (N=233 surveys). Procedures and measures of attachment, supervisory satisfaction, supervisory style, social desirability, and supervisory working alliance are described. Results and conclusions are presented. As the first empirical test of attachment theory's ability to explain aspects of counselor trainees' experiences in supervision, the results are encouraging. Further research directions are discussed. Contains 16 references. (Author/EMK)

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INFLUENCE OF TRAINEE ATTACHMENT ON COUNSELOR SUPERVISION

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Introduction

Attachment theory offers a useful framework for the study of human behavior in relationships. It has been suggested that applying attachment theory to the study of supervision may increase understanding of both the trainee's and supervisor's experience of supervision (Pistole & Watkins, 1995; Watkins, 1995). Reviews of empirical work done in the field of supervision point consistently to the need for more information on the supervisory relationship and trainee individual characteristics (Holloway, 1992). To date, no empirical studies exist that examine the effect of trainee attachment on supervisory variables, and therefore, the main goal of this study was to investigate the influence of trainee attachment on trainee satisfaction with supervision, perceptions of the supervisory relationship, and perceptions of supervisory style.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were graduate students providing individual counseling or psychotherapy and receiving individual supervision. Approximately 485 surveys were distributed by on-site contacts at various colleges and universities, and 233 were completed and returned, yielding a 48% return rate. A power analysis was conducted, and it was determined that a sample size of 171 was needed to detect an effect size of .10 with a 90% probability (using alpha = .05). The effect size was a conservative estimate since this was an exploratory study (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Therefore, the sample size obtained was deemed sufficient.

Seventy-six percent of the participants were female; by race, 11% were African-American/Black, 4% Asian-American/Asian Indian/Pacific Islander, 3% Biracial/Multiracial, 75% Caucasian-American/White, 3% Hispanic-American/Latino/Latina, 1% Native American/American Indian, and 2% other. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 57 years with a mean of 30 and a standard deviation of eight. Several graduate programs of study were represented: 19% from Clinical Psychology, 6% from Community Counseling, 38% from Counseling Psychology, 5% from Counselor Education, 9% from Rehabilitation Counseling, 6% from School Counseling, 6% from School Psychology, and 11% from other programs (e.g., College Student Personnel, Social Work).

Clients seen by the counselor trainees were self-referred (72%), court mandated (3%), volunteering (e.g., for credit; 22%), or other (14%). Most of the participants were seeing clients at college counseling centers (61%), with the remainder at community mental health centers (9%), VA hospitals (2%), and other sites (27%). Participants' experience level varied considerably, ranging from one month to over 170 months of supervised counseling experience. The average number of months of counseling experience was 34, but the mode (the most common response) was eight months. Regarding supervision, participants reported having from three to over 99 sessions with their current supervisors. The mean number of supervision sessions with the current supervisor was 19, and the mode was 15. The standard deviation was 15 supervision sessions.

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Measures

The Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994) is a 40 item self-report measure of adult attachment. Participants respond to the items, which are worded as statements (e.g., "I feel confident about relating to others"), using a six-point Likert scale on which 1=totally disagree and 6=totally agree. Items are grouped into five factors or dimensions of attachment: Confidence (8 items), Discomfort with Closeness (10 items), Need for Approval (7 items), Preoccupation with Relationships (8 items), and Relationships as Secondary (7 items). Scores on Confidence can vary from 8 to 48, on Discomfort with Closeness from 10 to 60, on Need for Approval from 7 to 42, on Preoccupation with Relationships from 8 to 48, and on Relationships as Secondary from 7 to 42. Evidence to support the reliability and validity of the measure is discussed by the authors who utilized factor analysis and cluster analysis, calculated coefficient alphas, conducted retest reliability studies, and examined correlations of their measure with other measures of attachment style. Their samples included college students and high school students.

The Supervisory Satisfaction Questionnaire (SSQ), created by Ladany, Hill, Corbett, and Nutt (1996) by modifying the Client Satisfaction Questionnaire (Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, & Nguyen, 1979), is composed of eight questions that evaluate a trainee's happiness or satisfaction with different aspects of the supervision she or he received. Respondents use a four-point Likert scale with 1 as low and 4 as high so that higher scores indicate more satisfaction with supervision. Scores on the SSQ range from 8 to 32. Sample SSQ items are, "To what extent has this supervision fit your needs?" and "Did you get the kind of supervision you wanted?" Satisfactory reliability and convergent validity were reported in Ladany et al. (1996).

The Supervisory Styles Inventory - Trainee version (SSI-T; Friedlander & Ward, 1984) consists of 25 items, one word each, which assess the supervisory style or "supervisor's distinctive manner of approaching and responding to trainees and of implementing supervision" (Friedlander & Ward, 1984, p. 541). The SSI-T is composed of three factors: Attractive, Interpersonally Sensitive, and Task Oriented. Respondents indicate on a seven-point Likert scale the extent to which their supervisor's style is characterized by the item (e.g., "warm," "friendly," "invested," "perceptive"). Responses range from 1=not very to 7=very. Only the Attractive and Interpersonally Sensitive factors from the SSI-T were used in the present study. Results supporting the reliability and convergent validity of the measure for samples of graduate level trainees were described in Friedlander & Ward (1984).

The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (short form; M-C 10; Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972) consists of 10 true-false items designed to assess the extent to which respondents want to portray an extremely positive image of themselves. The M-C 10 was used to control for social desirability and has adequate reliability and validity for samples of university students.

The Working Alliance Inventory - Trainee version (WAI-T; Bahrick, 1990) is a 36-item measure of the supervisory working alliance from the trainee's point of view. By revising items from the Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath & Greenberg, 1986), Bahrick (1990) created this scale which has three 12-item subscales to represent the three aspects of the supervisory working alliance: Goals, Tasks, and Bond. Respondents use a seven-point Likert scale from 1=never to 7=always. Sample items from each subscale include "We have established a good understanding of the things I need to work on" (Goals subscale), "I am frustrated by the things we are doing in supervision" (Tasks subscale), and "I believe [my supervisor] likes me" (Bond subscale). Only the Bond subscale, which measures the extent to which a sense of bond is experienced between trainee and supervisor, was used in the current study because it is related conceptually to attachment which offers hypotheses about aspects of human relationships. The WAI-T has demonstrated adequate internal consistency and validity.

Procedures

Survey packets were distributed by on-site contacts at different colleges and universities in the United States. Packets contained an instruction letter for participants including a statement regarding informed consent, the Attachment Style Questionnaire (Feeney et al., 1994), the Supervisory Satisfaction Questionnaire (Larsen et al., 1979, as modified by Ladany et al., 1996), the Supervisory Styles Inventory - trainee version (Friedlander & Ward, 1984), the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability

Scale - short form (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972), the Working Alliance Inventory - trainee version (Bahrick, 1990), and a demographic information questionnaire. In addition, a candy bar and a postcard entry for a drawing for cash prizes were included as incentives.

Results

In order to test the four hypotheses that trainee attachment dimensions (i.e., Confidence, Discomfort with Closeness, Need for Approval, Preoccupation with Relationships, and Relationships as Secondary) may predict trainee satisfaction with supervision (Hypothesis 1), trainee perceptions of the supervisory bond (Hypothesis 2), trainee perceptions of supervisory style as attractive (Hypothesis 3), and trainee perceptions of supervisory style as interpersonally sensitive (Hypothesis 4), four multiple regression analyses were computed. In all four equations, trainee attachment dimensions explained a significant amount of the variance in the dependent variables. However, only certain attachment dimensions had statistically significant standardized regression coefficients; therefore, some attachment dimensions were more useful than others in the prediction of dependent variables.

For satisfaction with supervision, perceptions of supervisory style as attractive, and perceptions of supervisory style as interpersonally sensitive, the attachment dimension of Confidence contributed strongly. In other words, trainees who were more confident about relating to others were more likely to be satisfied with supervision and to see their supervisor's style as attractive and interpersonally sensitive. The attachment dimension of Preoccupation with Relationships was another significant predictor of trainee satisfaction. Trainees who worried a lot about their relationships, particularly that others would not care as much about them as they cared for others, tended to be less satisfied with supervision.

Conclusions

As the first empirical test of attachment theory's ability to explain aspects of counselor trainees' experiences in supervision, this study provided some evidence that attachment theory may hold promise as a framework within which to conceptualize supervisory relationship dynamics. Although the attachment dimensions together were found to be significant predictors of trainee satisfaction with supervision, perceptions of the supervisory relationship, and perceptions of supervisory style, they only accounted for a relatively small amount of variance, ranging from 11% to 19%. Additionally, only two of the five attachment dimensions, Confidence and Preoccupation with Relationships, proved to contribute significantly to the explanation of trainee perceptions related to supervision, above and beyond the contribution made by the other attachment dimensions. The secure attachment dimension (i.e., Confidence) for trainees was the most powerful predictor. Trainees characterized as having a secure attachment, and subsequently possessing more positive self-views and more confidence in relating to others, tended to be more satisfied with their supervision experience in general. These securely attached trainees also were more likely to view their supervisor's style as attractive (e.g., warm, positive, supportive) or interpersonally sensitive (e.g., intuitive, invested, and therapeutic).

Since the attachment dimensions of the trainee did not explain a large amount of the trainees' perceptions of supervision, other relevant variables that might account for more variance need to be considered. For example, the supervisor's attachment, behaviors, and approach to supervision may be important determinants of how satisfied a trainee is with supervision or how the supervisee experiences the supervisory bond. Perhaps another useful variable might be the amount of time the supervision has taken place. Given a longer-term relationship, it is possible that the trainee's attachment system may be more activated, and the ability of trainee attachment to explain more of trainee perceptions might increase. Also taking into account client variables, such as diagnosis or extent to which clients generate a countertransference reaction in trainees, may increase the amount of variance in trainee perceptions of supervision that can be explained. Finally, a more supervision-specific measure of attachment may have provided stronger explanations for trainee perceptions of their supervision experience.

There are several limitations of this study which may affect generalizability of the results. First, since approximately half of the survey recipients responded, it is possible that, due to self-selection bias, these

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trainees differed in significant ways from the ones who chose not to participate. A second limitation of this study is its mono-method bias in that all data were drawn from a written, self-report survey of participants. A mono-operation bias may have existed as well because only one instrument was used to measure each variable of interest. Finally, although theory would suggest that attachment could influence or determine trainee satisfaction with supervision and trainee perceptions of supervisory style, the use of a correlational design in this study precludes the making of causal inference.

Regarding implications for the practice of supervision, trainee attachment has been shown to contribute to how a trainee views aspects of supervision. Therefore, supervisors may want to try to assess trainee attachment in order to anticipate its effects on supervision. As Wynne (1984) recognized, attachment difficulties may need to be resolved before other interpersonal problems, such as communication conflicts, can be addressed. By functioning as the trainee's secure base, a supervisor may be able to effect change in the trainee's attachment system, from an insecure one to one with greater attachment security (Pistole & Watkins, 1995). Encouraging trainees to consider seeking personal therapy may be another way in which supervisors can assist trainees in changing their attachment if trainee attachment is problematic. Care must be taken not to use attachment to label a trainee negatively and permanently. An insecure attachment is formed as an adaptive means for an infant to cope with deficiencies in her or his caregiving environment; therefore, although an individual's attachment may be characterized as insecure, at one point in her or his life, those behaviors served a useful purpose in ensuring an individual's survival. Changes in attachment may be possible later in life through supportive relationships, significant life events, and psychotherapy (Grossmann & Grossmann, 1991).

Regarding implications for future research, attachment alone cannot answer the question asked by supervisors utilizing a developmental approach to supervision: what trainee characteristics are important to assess and consider when trying to select the most effective supervisory interventions? Continued study of other trainee characteristics, including cognitive level, culture, and personality dynamics, is needed in order to yield more information on their relative contributions to improving supervision for the trainee. Studies of the interactional effects of both trainee and supervisor attachment are needed, given the "reciprocal quality of adult attachment" (Pistole & Watkins, 1995, p. 460). Another important avenue to pursue is measurement development, refinement, and validation. Use of alternative methods of assessing attachment (e.g., interviews, observer ratings of behavior; Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992) are necessary, especially if attachment dimensions operate outside of conscious awareness (Bowlby, 1978). With measures of attachment specific to supervision, it is possible that attachment could be a very powerful predictor of supervision relationship outcomes (Shaver & Brennan, 1992). Ultimately, effects of trainee attachment on counseling outcome (e.g., client decrease in symptomatology) need to be examined since the goal of supervision is to train counselors to provide effective psychotherapy services to clients.

As the first empirical test of attachment theory's ability to explain aspects of trainee experiences in supervision, this study provided some evidence that attachment theory may hold promise as a framework within which to conceptualize supervisory relationship dynamics. It is hoped that these findings will stimulate additional research and thinking on how attachment theory constructs may enrich the study and practice of supervision.

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